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AUTHOR Ring, Tracey R.
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ABSTRACT

Data collected from a sample of over 200 elementary school children from Tennessee were used for studying their perceptions of the future. An interview guide-questionnaire provided information regarding children's perceptions along the following three different dimensions: how children perceived their own personal future; how they perceived changes that might happen in the future in their own communities; and how they perceived changes that might happen globally. When asked about their personal future, the majority of the children thought that they will be: living in Tennessee working in caring or public services professions after graduating from college; richer than their parents; as happy as they were at the time of the interview; and leading a life made easier by technological developments. Their biggest fear about growing up was that of being shot or hurt in some way. As for their future community, the children indicated that the world would still see significant problems with drug abuse, violence, homelessness, poverty, joblessness, and an increase in one-parent homes. Finally, children were somewhat negative in relation to the future of the world. Although they believed that cures for major diseases will be found, most thought that something bad might happen to our planet. (AA)

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ED 387 272

PERCEPTIONS OF THE FUTURE HELD BY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Tracey R.Ring
Middle Tennessee State University

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Tracey R. Ring
Middle Tennessee State University

The purpose of this study was to provide a descriptive analysis of the perceptions held by selected groups of elementary school children regarding the future. Data were collected from a sample of over 200 children covering grade levels one through six in two different school districts in the middle Tennessee region. An interview guide/questionnaire was constructed which yielded information regarding the perceptions which children held along three different dimensions: how children perceived their own personal future; how they perceived changes that might happen in the future in their own communities; and how they perceived changes that might happen globally.

For purposes of today's discussion, I would like to present the analyses from selected questions in these three different dimensions. A larger analysis yielded norms for two demographic variables: gender and whether or not the children came from rural or urban schools within the district. However, this paper will contain only a summary of selected questions of interest when these two variables as well as grade levels were combined.*

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*For complete norms; write the author at Box 69, MTSU

I. Personal Future

In this section, children were asked to respond to ten different questions that clustered around their own personal futures. When asked what kind of work they thought they would be doing in the future, the responses were not inconsistent with previous studies such as the National Survey on the Future conducted by Weekly Reader. Caring professions such as nursing, teaching and health care were mentioned by the majority (slightly over 60%) of elementary school students. A second category of work, public service workers, was preferred by 31% of children who responded. In this category were jobs such as police officer, firefighter, bus driver, etc. When asked where they thought they might be living when they were as old as their parents, 41% of the children indicated they would be living in the same state, Tennessee, while 33% indicated that they would be living in their same community. This supports the notion promulgated by some that we are currently witnessing a decrease in the mobility of the American population. Very few, 7%, noted that they would be living in another part of the state while only 2% indicated that they would probably be living outside the US. When asked what scares them most about growing up, the vast majority of children indicated they were frightened of being shot or hurt in some way. More than 55% of the children said that they expected to graduate from college, 66% of them indicated that they expected to be richer than their parents, and 74% indicated they thought they would be as happy

or happier as they are now. Predictably, when asked what things they would have in their homes in the future that they do not have today, most children responded with a kind of technological device that would make life rather comfortable and easy: robots that would do most anything thereby taking the work away from humans! A final question in this section asked if they thought it okay if men stayed home to take care of children while women left the home to go to work: 90% of the children said it was fine by them.

II. Future of Community

In this section, children were asked 12 questions relating to problems and issues which they perceived would still exist in the future. For example, most children indicated that their future world would still see significant problems in their communities with drug abuses, violence, homelessness, poverty and joblessness. As well, most indicated that we will continue to see increases in one parent homes. When asked if we will ever have a female President, over 36% said yes. Although our research team thought the question, "what do you think you would see if you could come back to this community 100 years from today" was a reasonably brilliant item, at least one young man in the fifth grade leaped over such brilliance when he responded: students still trying to figure out the old math problems in the 1994 math books used in Mrs. Atworth's room!!

III. Future of the World

While the responses by children in the two previous categories contained reasonably positive, the responses in this last category were somewhat negative. The majority of the children indicated that they thought our water would still be polluted in the future, that having enough food to feed all of the people in the world would be a major problem and, in fact, that we will suffer in the future from having too many people in the world. Most thought that something bad might even happen to our planet. However, over 60% indicated that we will find a cure in the future for most major diseases such as cancer and AIDS. Almost half of the children believed that we will ultimately find human-like creatures on other planets in the future. For the fitting final question in the research survey, "do you think the world will be a better place in which to live in the future?", 40% agreed it would but 60% were much more skeptical about the future.